

*Advent I Commitment Sunday Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins*

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The Lord hath need of them.

Jesus sends two disciples ahead, to prepare for his final entry into Jerusalem. They are to go into one of the suburbs, and at a crossroads, they will find a donkey tied up. They are to loose that donkey and bring her to Jesus. We can safely assume that the disciples weren't sure they wanted to become donkey rustlers, and so Jesus reassures them, "if anyone stops you and asks what you think you're doing, just tell them, the Lord needs them."

"The Lord hath need." This seems to have been a kind of code or password, with great significance among Jesus' earliest followers. Later that same week, two disciples will go to prepare for the Last Supper. They will merely tell a man that the Lord needs a place to celebrate the Passover, and he will turn over half his house to them. They had given the Lord Jesus their hearts, and they acknowledged

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that all they had and all they were, were his. If he needed it, they would give it. They were so convinced about the mission of Jesus Christ, that their responses to the needs of that mission were immediate, sacrificial, and joyful.

“Now you know where I’m going.” The following saying is accredited to Martin Luther without any real evidence, but still it’s a great line. “There are three conversions a person needs to experience: the conversion of the head, the conversion of the heart, and the conversion of the pocketbook.” That reminds us that we need to be converted in mind and heart and life - in thinking, loving and living. Christian conversion is a matter of thought, will and deed.

We don’t know who the owner of the donkey was, but we have many other New Testament examples of committed, faithful and generous stewards. Think of that boy who shared his picnic lunch, the same lunch that fed some five thousand. Think of the widow

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who put so much of what she had, though it was just a penny, into the chest to help maintain the worship of the temple. Think of those women, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna, who followed our Lord all the way to the cross and tomb, and who provided for Jesus and his disciples out of their means. These Gospel examples show us people who give generously for the mission of Jesus Christ, the maintenance of the worship of God, the relief of the hungry and needy. And we are called, in our day and in our way, to be about and to give for the same things.

We sing, “We give thee but thine own” and we acknowledge over and over again, “all things come of thee and of thine own have we given thee.” This is true of whatever financial gifts and pledges we make, but it is also true of everything we give, especially our time.

Paul is not offering a stewardship sermon in our Epistle today. He is not asking people to give more. His call is broader and wider.

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He wants them to love more. He lays down the law with the Romans, and the law is this: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” That is the Christian law, rule and standard. Love is what we owe; this is our duty and our debt. We owe this love to everyone - to friend and foe, to those we like and those we dislike, to the good and the bad. We owe it to God to love him, we owe it to our neighbour to love her, and we owe it to ourselves to love ourselves. All our sins are either a failure to, or a refusal to, love.

But we who cannot or will not love, only find further condemnation in this summary of the law. Too often, we sit back and admire the beauty of Jesus’ teaching - the wisdom, balance and elegance of the summary of the law - and we neglect to notice in the light of that teaching the ugliness, the meanness, and the injustice of our own lives. Our first response to “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”, should not be “well, that sounds like a good idea” but rather “Lord have mercy upon us.”

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God's love for us in Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit, is so great and powerful that he forgives our hard hearts and would give us a heart of flesh, a heart of love. "My song is love unknown, my Saviour's love to me, love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be."

We give thee but thine own, this is also true of the love we share. We love because God first loved us. We give because God first gave to us, for we can only give what we have first received, and we call this sharing. It is to that sharing of all God's gifts that we commit ourselves here today.

We think in this season of Advent about preparing for the coming of the Lord. Jesus Christ, who came in humility to save, will come again to judge, and he is ever-present as both Saviour and Judge. I am always thrilled by this season of Advent, because it helps us to get to the heart of the matter, and because its messages are so practical. Paul gets to the heart of the matter: Love. Jesus

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goes to the heart of the city: the temple. Now, let's be honest about the lack of love in our heart, and the lack of prayer in our temples.

Jesus reminds the people that the temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations, in the heart of the city. Today we are told about the need for preparation for the coming of the Lord, for when Jesus came some were ready, and some were not. And we are given the most practical instruction on how to prepare, how to be ready, by prayer to God and by the love of neighbour.

As we go forward together in mission and ministry, let us reclaim this place and congregation as a house of prayer, where the law of love is upheld, and recommit ourselves to these. +